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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 009343

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/28/2016

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SUBJECT: POLITBURO MEMBER GOES DOWN HARD

REF: HAVANA 8986

Classified By: MICHAEL E. PARMLY FOR REASONS 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Politburo member Juan Carlos Robinson Agramonte was abruptly dismissed on April 28 for "arrogance, pretension, and behavior unbecoming of a communist." The harsh language suggests that Robinson's misdeeds were seriously offensive to top-level regime officials. He may also have been selected as a convenient - or deserving - scapegoat for Castro's anti-corruption campaign. Finally, an internal power struggle (such as Robinson's rumored falling out with a Raul insider), could be responsible for the dismissal. The GOC's promise of "legal consequences" leads us to believe there is more to come. End Summary.

A Hard Fall

¶2. (C) Today's April 28 front page of communist daily "Granma" announced the abrupt dismissal of Juan Carlos Robinson Agramonte, a member of the Politburo (the highest rung in the Communist Party hierarchy). The "Granma" article describes Robinson as "haughty, arrogant, ostentatious, abusive of power, soft in his ethics, and dishonest." He is accused of behaving in a manner "unbecoming of a communist and member of the Politburo." The article also asserts that Robinson was "criticized and exhorted" more than once to mend his ways, and that he only pretended to change his bad behavior. In addition to his dismissal from the Politburo, Central Committee and Communist Party, Robinson was threatened with "legal consequences." The language is exceptionally strong; the article states, in essence, that Robinson was an obnoxious loudmouth who didn't know how to behave, and now he is going to pay.

A Typical Apparatchik

¶3. (C) The 49-year-old Robinson is an Habanero of Jamaican descent who threw himself into the Communist Party structure at an early age. He went to Angola as a teacher and joined the leadership of the Federation of University Students (FEU). He became a member of the Central Committee in 1986. His career took off in the 1990s, most notably when he became First Secretary of the Communist Party in Guantanamo Province in 1994. Shortly afterward, he replaced Esteban Lazo (another leading black official) as First Secretary of the Communist Party in Santiago Province. Lazo is rumored to be something of a godfather to Robinson, and may have helped get him the Santiago

position and subsequent promotion to the Politburo in 1997. According to Miami's Cuba Transition Project, Robinson's career corresponds to that of Robertico Robaina and Carlos Lage.

14. (C) Robinson's ability to hold on to the Party leadership in Santiago for so many years was no small feat, but he reportedly did not develop a good reputation. A Cuban USINT staff member said Robinson made stupid missteps, such as installing a private generator and keeping his house ablaze in light while the rest of the city suffered blackouts. This kind of ostentatious behavior would have come under greater scrutiny once he made it to the "big time" in Havana. Certainly Robinson must have been exceptionally naughty to have received such a harsh dismissal. One non-political Cuban commented to us, "Le cogio la rueda" (literally, "the wheel got him" - i.e., he was riding so high that his own momentum brought him back down.)

What'd He Do?

15. (C) While "Granma" does not detail Robinson's bad behavior, words like "indiscretion" and "ostentation" are pseudonyms for typical misdeeds such as maintaining extra houses/women, pursuing shady business deals, developing close contacts with foreigners, or talking too much about Party business. It is not that other Party officials shun these practices, but rather that Robinson may have been too reckless in his pursuit of them.

16. (C) It is also possible that Robinson's mischief made him a convenient scapegoat for use in Castro's latest

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campaign: Anti-corruption (reftel). The GOC has gone after the "little guys" (gas station attendants, etc.) for the past six months, but the reluctance to extend the campaign to the highest levels is conspicuous. Furthermore, it is significant that the decision to dismiss Robinson appears in a note that includes an update of the anti-corruption drive.

17. (C) Finally, Robinson's dismissal might come as little more than the typical denouement of an internal power struggle. According to the Cuban Transition Project, Robinson had run afoul of Machado Ventura in the early 2000s. (Ventura is a fearsome figure close to Raul Castro, and making his black list is not a healthy career move. No one but Raul or Fidel could have protected Robinson in this instance, and certainly not Esteban Lazo.) Whether Ventura was involved or not, Politburo dismissals often come as the result of stepping on the wrong toes, or otherwise losing an internal power struggle.

18. (C) As usual, Robinson's dismissal came as a surprise and we can only speculate about the reasons behind it. Details may eventually filter out through Cuba's "Radio Bemba" ("Mouth Radio," or rumor mill), but in the interim we await "Granma's" teaser that there is more to come.
PARMLY